



# **PINTER'S COMEDY OF MENACE**

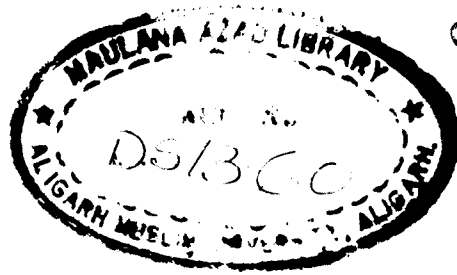
DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
**Master of Philosophy**  
IN  
ENGLISH

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ALIGARH (INDIA)  
June 1988

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DS1360

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
AND  
MODERN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES



ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY  
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**June 4, 1988**

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has completed her dissertation under my  
supervision. To the best of my knowledge  
this is her own work, and it is suitable  
for submission in supplication of M.Phil  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zahida Zaidi", is written over the printed name.

**Professor Zahida Zaidi  
(Supervisor)**

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I feel privileged in expressing my deep gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Zahida Zaidi, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh for her invaluable guidance and constant encouragement in the completion of my work . With her extensive knowledge and deep involvement in modern drama she helped me to overcome my own shortcomings, and complete this project within a short time. Without her constant care and guidance my dissertation would not have taken its present shape.

I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Munir Ahmad, Chairman, Department of English and Librarian, Maulana Azad Library, A.M.U., Aligarh for the departmental and library facilities that I have enjoyed for the completion of my work.

Manjula Piplani.  
- MANJULA PIPLANI

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## CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION : DARK COMEDY AND COMEDY OF MENACE

## CHAPTER - I

### INTRODUCTION : Dark Comedy and Comedy of Menace.

The Dark Comedy is a modern phenomenon in literature. It is a mingling of tragic and comic within the same framework. But before elaborating the concept of the Dark Comedy it would be appropriate to discuss the concept of pure comedy and tragedy in the tradition of drama. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or comprehensive study of the two genres but an attempt would be made to discuss them in a historical perspective in order to understand better the distinctive features of the modern Dark Comedy which reflects the complex experiences of modern times and the predicament of the modern man.

Everyman's Encyclopaedia defines comedy as a genre that :

excites laughter and derision, deals  
with the absurdities of everyday life,  
and ends happily for most of the characters,  
who have suffered from the  
exigencies of an individual egoist.<sup>1</sup>

The word comedy seems to be derived from the Greek word 'comus' meaning 'revel' and comedy evolved out of the revels associated with the celebrations honouring Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. This suggests its origin in

harvest festivities and ritual of the peasants. A group of men masked or costumed fantastically indulged in songs, dances and jokes. The choral lyrics were some times grotesque, and vulgar, some times serious and elevated in tone but never sentimental. Aristophanes was the comic genius of the great age of Greek Drama.

New comedy of Greek period was different from the old. It was influenced by Euripides and also by urban refinements and tastes. At this time the old grotesque dresses and chorus almost disappeared but masks persisted. The crude buffoonery was subdued and personal satire arose with the development of complicated plots. The characters were now familiar figures. Thus New Comedy was comparatively realistic and was known as comedy of manners. Coming to Shakesperean and Elizabethan comedy we find that Shakespeare's comedies are mostly comedies of mistaken identity romance and humour. But they are not purely comic in effect due to excessive romantic element. Ben Jonson's comic plays are closer to the concept of pure comedy. They are called 'Comedy of Humours'. Ben Jonson introduced realism and precision of form in comedy. His comedies deal with contemporary life and characters who represent some folly or vice in human nature. He satirizes them in order to make us laugh and to cure the errors in characters. In The Poetics Aristotle suggested that the laughter of comedy is derision and it is caused by a sense of superiority. While witnessing a comedy the spectators have a feeling that they are superior to the



comic character and this feeling satisfies their egos and also prevents identification with the characters.

In the 17th century Moliere is the great exponent of Comedy of Manners. He depicts and satirizes the hypocrisy and pretensions of 17th century French society. He tried to reform through entertainment. He was of the view that the purpose of comedy was to represent in a general way all the defects of the people, and particularly of the age. In England the Comedy of Manners was written in the Restoration period. Although influenced by Ben Jonson the Restoration Comedy of Manners was more lively and appealing. It was no longer a story-telling drama like the Elizabethan Comedy. It was a comedy of incidents, tricks and mistakes and flirtation was the main source of comic pleasure in it.

Gradually another change occurred in the concept of comedy. Playwrights started writing sentimental type of comedy. The main features of sentimental comedy were decency in language, praise of virtuous love and marriage and attack on social vices. It developed into the drawing room comedy of Scribe which was entertaining in its intentions conventional in theme, and sentimental in approach, but technically crisp and polished. Thus up to now the purpose of comedy was to criticize or reform persons and institutions holding social or moral power and its target were usually aristocrats or people in a position to exercise power. But in 19th

century we find a different mode of comedy taking hold, in which the subject matter incorporated everyday human concerns. And at the end of 19th century the concept of comedy was totally revolutionized by Bernard Shaw. In his plays there is a striking philosophic content and seriousness of purpose, but his fine sense of humor qualifies his plays as comedies. He has projected his philosophy of life-force through comic characters and witty dialogues. Thus he enriched the genre and brought it at par with serious and tragic drama.

But before discussing the concept of modern comedy we should have<sup>a</sup> brief look at the changing concept of tragedy through the ages. Tragedy as a form came into existence in ancient Greece in 5th century. B.C. Greek Tragedy was a story of a certain magnitude, depth and seriousness presenting the spectacle of moral and spiritual transgression, suffering, pain and final reconciliation and transcendence. It presents man in a universal, moral and metaphysical perspective. Man is often seen as a plaything in the hands of supernatural forces and a target of conflict among gods and goddesses representing different dimensions of human psyche and moral ideas. But it also revealed man's potential and his ability to rise above his destiny thus reaffirming his moral and spiritual dimensions. The greatest exponents of this form were Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Aeschylus was the most religious of the three.

His plays combined art and religion. He deals with the problem of divine justice and moral laws whose violation can bring doom. He also deals with the eternal problems of good and evil and other metaphysical themes, and supernatural powers play <sup>an</sup> important role in his plays. The plays of Sophocles on the other hand were based on the tragic conception that human character is basically imperfect and that man is helpless before the overpowering force of circumstances. He deals with mythological and legendary stories in humanistic terms. He too, was particularly interested in man and his relation with gods and supernatural powers. The characters and their actions are revealed in the light of metaphysical concepts. His plays reveal the suffering of human soul. With Euripides realistic elements entered into the world of tragedy. Euripides deals with that aspect of human nature which destroys man and brings about his suffering and fall. He also challenged the traditional moral and religious ideas and his tragedy is revolutionary in concept. But what ~~these~~ dramatists had in common was their pre-occupation with religion, God, moral ideas and metaphysical forces. But in an oblique way the myths and stories on which these plays are based also explore spiritual and moral dimensions and probe the depth of human psyche.

The first and most prestigious definition of tragedy was given by Aristotle in Poetics. He said :

A tragedy, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself, in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of work in a dramatic, not in a narrative form, with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish catharsis of such emotions.<sup>2</sup>

Thus according to Aristotle tragedy is concerned with momentous and disastrous actions of the hero, a man of noble rank, high position, and great fame. But he should be neither too good nor too bad. He must fall from his high position due to some weakness or error in judgment which is called 'hamartia'. In course of the play the hero discovers the truth about himself and his fate. According to Aristotle tragedy must appeal to our emotions of pity and fear.

During the Middle Ages tragedy was a narrative rather than a play. But it was dignified because it talked of great people and how fortune causes great men to fall from prosperity to adversity. The dramatists of this period considered verse inseparable from tragic drama. They were of the view that tragedy and poetic language belong to higher and aristocratic domain of life.

Shakesperean tragedy of Renaissance is essentially a tale of suffering and calamity culminating in death. It is primarily concerned with one person, the hero. Only in love tragedies the heroine is treated in the same way as the hero. The tragedy, in some way or the other, is caused by the hero himself, although external conditions, abnormal circumstances, element of chance and metaphysical forces also play a great part in the downfall of the tragic hero. But the events in these plays are also a process of self-discovery and at the end of a Shakesperean tragedy there is usually a sense of reconciliation and acceptance of human destiny.

In the Elizabethan theatre tragedy attempted to incorporate universal values and it attempted to reach beyond the fall of individual greatness. Elizabethan tragedy also showed great freedom and variety in form and not only was poetic in expression but also enjoyed the poetic licence in the treatment of its subject. In the 17th century Corneille and Racine in France wrote tragedy in simple, severe and lofty manner. They often based their plays on Greek myths and legends but they gave it a new interpretation which in a way is more modern because of its intense psychological preoccupation but limited in its perspective and involvement compared to the original Greek Tragedy. In the Romantic period poets tried to write tragedy but they failed to write successful tragic plays because their approach was more

lyrical than theatrical and in some cases more concerned in social reform and revolution rather than with fundamental question of human destiny. The interest of the victorian writers in drama is less pronounced than it was in the case of the romantic writers. The drama generally lost its depth and seriousness of purpose and if we find some authentic tragic vision it is in the world of fiction.

The concept of tragedy took a new turn in the plays of Ibsen. His plays reflect a conflict between an individual on the one hand and society with its demands and pressure and dark forces of human personality on the other. His heroes are often destroyed in their struggle to change the social structure and its false value system. But there is a deeper struggle going on in their conscience. They try to understand the state of man in the universe and rebel against God and the irrational forces associated with that supreme power. But they are different from the heroes of Greek and Elizabethan tragedy in the sense that they do not belong to a higher or nobel position. They are rather middle class people in different professions. And while in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy the emphasis was on philosophical and religious aspect, Ibsen is more concern<sup>ed</sup> with social, psychological and moral aspects of human existence. Shaw calls Ibsen "the first great dramatic chemist" and his plays "a chemical combination which made the spectator laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other."<sup>3</sup>

While Ibsen was interested in the social, political and moral aspects of human situation, Strindberg's main concern lay in probing the unconscious mind of his characters. In order to express his ideas more effectively Strindberg introduced a dream technique in some of his plays which was the prototype of both expressionism and surrealism. Thus it became a liberating force in modern drama and a guiding genre for various experimental modes and techniques. Strindberg's drama is intensely subjective expressing the torments and anguish of his soul but this introspection becomes a means of exploring the intricate complexities of human psyche, often ending in a universal vision of existence.

O'Neill wrote tragic plays because the form suited his temperament and subject matter. His plays record a quest for identity, value system and meaning. He is concerned with the dilemma of modern man in a universe without God and he is in search of a new absolute which will give meaning to life. He expressed this state of man in a letter to George Jean Nathan that since "God is dead man feels sick and lonely because there is no one to comfort him".<sup>4</sup> His plays reflect the spiritual crisis he was going through. O'Neill was influenced by the Greek idea of tragedy and he also revived the tradition of trilogy, chorus and masks in some of his plays but in strictly modern terms.

While O'Neill was concerned with finding a solution to the dilemma of existence and defining values in the new perspective of reality, Pirandello challenges the fixed concept of reality itself. He is a great revolutionary in themes as well as in form and technique. He challenges the superficial and complacent surface reality in order to project the complex vision of reality with its elusive and disturbing ambiguity. For Pirandello there is no permanent and fixed reality because life itself is in a constant state of flux and cannot be captured in fixed concepts. Every human being has a multifaceted personality. Man is endowed with intellect but it is intellect which is the cause of man's suffering for as soon as man yields to his passion or instinct, reason comes in between and gives man a feeling of guilt. Through reason man also tries to define life and give it a form but in doing so he turns life into a concept. To Pirandello our social system as well as our thought system tends to fix life and also individuals. But he remarks :

I have constantly attempted to  
show that nothing offends life  
so much as reducing it to a  
hollow concept.<sup>5</sup>

Again in his essay 'Umorismo' he comments that concepts are the death of spontaneity and reason is inadequate before the mysterious quality of existence. The human mystery



remains beyond human comprehension, and those who would pluck it out will come away baffled and in tears.<sup>6</sup> Thus Pirandello's philosophy of life has strong pessimistic elements but he has transformed it in humor and laughter and his concept of humor is basically tragic. Vittorini remarks that the humor in Pirandello's plays is 'grotesque humor' which hurts us most but also relieves the tension. It expresses a frantic and confused state of mind that forces man to burst into laughter before the harsh conditions of life.<sup>7</sup> Pirandello says :

If at times I laugh and sing,  
I do it because this is the  
only way I have to provide an  
outlet for my painful tears.<sup>8</sup>

He conceives life as a tragedy but presents it as comedy. Humor for him is the exquisite mingling of pain and laughter. A character in the play Each in His Own Ways remarks :

That's my way of laughing  
and my laughter hurts me  
more than anyone else.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the more we laugh the more intense is the feeling of pain and suffering. In this respect Pirandello represents most comprehensively the concept of the Dark Comedy and also foreshadows ~~severe~~ aspects of the "Aburd Theatre".

As early as the beginning of 20th Century we find a complex, profound and sometimes disturbing vision of reality in Chekhov's plays reflected through a mingling of tragic and comic, pathetic and ludicrous, tears and laughter. His plays reflect the inner conflicts of his characters, their moral and spiritual crisis, the impact of environment upon their lives and also their aimlessness, inertia and inability to change their circumstances. He also projects absurdity of inauthentic way of living but he is not a nihilist. His purpose is to reveal life in its immediacy, fulness and complexity. His plays are called 'poetic' because his realism combines impressionism and symbolism and the language he uses is lyrical and suggestive. The symbols he uses are concrete. They deepen and enhance the plays' meaning, revealing the inner conflicts and giving it a poetic quality. Chekhov is able to suggest universal through particular and although his plays are rooted in time, they have a quality of timelessness about them. Through his orchestration of themes he projects his complex vision of existence. Chekhov is also the first dramatist who realized the limitations of language as means of communication foreshadowing some more modern attitudes. In him we find another impressive exponent of the Dark Comedy, and one who foreshadows certain elements of the 'Aburd Drama'.

The plays of Christopher Fry, T.S. Eliot and Sean O'Casey also express the mood of unrest and anxiety of modern times with the help of pathetic and comic. Fry

wrote comedies in which there is a mingling of the tragic aspects of life with his religious faith and his plays are called 'serio-comic' plays. Fry remarks :

I know that when I set about writing a comedy, the idea presents itself to me first as tragedy....If the characters were not qualified for tragedy, there would be no comedy.<sup>10</sup>

Eliot projects the disintegration, lifeless atmosphere, phenomenon of spiritual apathy and insensitiveness in modern society. His first play Murder in the Cathedral is a tragedy but from The Family Reunion onwards his plays do not qualify as tragedies in a traditional sense although they have tragic undertones. His probing into the dark recesses of human soul and spiritual and moral problems of modern men give them a serious tone and the recurring theme of spiritual election in his plays also underlines their religious dimension. However Eliot's involvement in these traditional problems is not conventional and complacent and he seems to be aware of the difficulties and ambiguities of a moral and spiritual quest in the modern age. O'Casey depicts the spirit of the age and the consequences of war in a violent mingling of tragic and farce. In Anouilh's plays the tragic is intensified with the help of a comic situation. His characters seek

escape from a world which has become sinful and vile and they find happiness only in death. He attacks the bourgeois society, its corrupt value system and mode of life, but his mask like characters turn pathos into ridicule. The language they speak reveal the hollowness of their lives but also produces laughter.

The presence of this dark, disturbing and ambiguous vision reflected in the drama of the writers mentioned above has given rise to the concept of Dark Comedy which is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. Life in modern times has become so complex that to depict this complexity the older form of pure comedy and tragedy are inadequate. Dark Comedy depicts the mood and complexities of the times. In modern times life is becoming more and more artificial and mechanical. Old human values have lost their validity and their hold on human conscience. Human relations have become hollow and lost a sense of commitment. Often it seems that there is no purpose or meaning in life and modern man is without a sense of direction. And in a world without a well-defined moral framework he feels lonely and insecure. He does not know what to do and where to go. He feels alienated because he is no longer a part of society. But there is a deep desire in him for communication which seems impossible in this harrowing and hollow atmosphere where the competitive system and dominance of materialistic values have made people self-centred and devoid of finer

shades of feelings. The plays written in this period are a reflection of the age and times and although the themes are tragic, their way of presentation is comic.

J.L. Styan in his book The Dark Comedy points out that the purpose of the playwright in a dark comedy is to make his audience suffer without the relief of tears and to make them mock without a true relief of laughter so the tensions become unbearable. In a dark comedy one pattern of feeling or one character is countered by another. The special feature of dark comedy is that a suffering man can also be a clown and <sup>a clown</sup> seen everyman. The protagonist of a dark comedy is usually a person very human and individual but he often assumes a universal significance. Dark Comedy appeals to both our mind and heart and it makes us analyse our own experiences critically. And although the audience remain at a distance they some how get involved in it, they feel disturbed. At the end of a dark comedy we do not find judgments. The issues are left unfinished, they seem rather unlimited. Nothing is resolved, only the unbearable human condition is exposed.

The most daring, imaginative and original expression of this dark humor and complex vision of reality are the plays which come under the title of 'Theatre of the Absurd' a term devised by Martin Esslin in his book of the same name pointing out that absurd originally is a musical term

meaning out of harmony and he extended its meaning to 'out of harmony with reason or propriety, incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.'<sup>11</sup> He says it is in this sense Camus used 'absurdity' when 'trying to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs.' Ionesco used the term 'absurd for that which is devoid of purpose'.<sup>12</sup> Everyman's Encyclopaedia defines the 'Theatre of the Absurd' as a :

term coined to describe those modern plays which dramatise some aspect of the philosophical belief that, since there is no God, there is, therefore, no essential meaning to human existence.<sup>13</sup>

Generally Absurd playwrights are concerned with expressing a sense of void and the absurdity of existence which come from the absence of God or some moral principle. They feel that since man has lost touch with the deeper meaning of existence we are living a life devoid of purpose and sense of direction. They deal with the philosophical problems of being and nothingness, search for ~~self~~-identity, life and death, time and evanescence, problem of language and communication etc. But they abandon logic and reason and present them in a form which combines symbolism with surrealism and expressionism. They also abandon psychology, subtlety of characterization and plot in the conventional sense. All the characters in Absurd Drama are symbolic

representations. They are used to create the image of man and human condition in a bewildering universe. They are stripped of all the superfluous layers of their social, political and cultural trappings, and create a haunting image of man in a universal and metaphysical perspective. Their domain is inner world. The motives and actions of these characters are elusive and often incomprehensible, thus preventing the identification of the audience with the characters at a superficial level. But at a deeper level one feels that these characters are representing our own predicament. The most characteristic feature of the Theatre of Absurd is that tragic themes are conveyed through comic means intensifying the absurdity of things. The laughter of these plays is horrifying and threatening and its tragic essence a process of self-discovery. These plays are also intended to be a critique of conventional and superficial way of life. They undermine a rational and scientific approach to life. They are concerned with the totality of existence. But these plays are not devoid of social and political interests although this interest varies from author to author and from play to play. The plays dramatize the disintegration of society, loss of higher values and meaningful relationships. They also deal with the problems of illusion and reality, sex and violence, physical and spiritual sterility. Another feature of Absurd Drama is an exposure of the cliché ridden language. Devaluation of

language is closely related to the ~~dilemma~~ of the modern times. They present their ideas in the concrete language of theatre through living images, symbols and setting e.g. the setting of Beckett's Waiting for Godot embodies the theme and insights of the author. But inspite of abstractions these plays are successful on the stage because they use multidimensional language of theatre. The plot of absurd plays does not develop in linear direction, it is rather spatial. Many absurd plays have circular structure ending exactly where they begin. Thus it is a drama which appears to be unreal and absurd in its form and theme, but which tries to capture reality at a deeper level.

Eugene Ionesco is 'the most characteristic protagonist' of the absurd <sup>drama</sup> in the opinion of ~~drama~~ R.N.Coe.<sup>14</sup> He satirizes the absurdity of man's behaviour in comic ways. He exposes the shallowness of conversation, the petty bourgeois behaviour, beliefs and values. For him the world in which we live is full of illusions and there is no possibility of communication between individuals because all language has become meaningless and disjointed. His plays are both laughable and terrifying because they reveal man's awareness of being, isolation of individuals and the unbearable fact of existence itself. His characters are both tragic and comic, they are very human and the absurdity they represent is not confined to one person



or group but is related to everyone's life and a mark of human condition itself. Ionesco once remarked that sometimes :

comedies make people cry even more than dramas ... the comedies that I write. When I want to write a tragedy I make them laugh, when I write a comedy, I make them cry.<sup>15</sup>

Jean Anouilh remarked about his play The Chairs that it is a masterpiece of black humour, 'that it is at times terribly funny; because it is horrifying and laughable,'<sup>16</sup> For Ionesco there is no difference between tragic and comic. He says :

As the comic is the intuition of the Absurd, it seems to be more conducive to despair than the tragic. (Again he remarks) Humour makes us conscious, with a free lucidity, of the tragic or delusory condition of man .....  
..... To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying..... the comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence.<sup>17</sup>

He dramatizes a world that has lost its metaphysical dimension and degradation of life which is partly the result of uncertainty of one's own identity and the certainty of death. Ionesco says :

I have no other images of the  
world, aside from those which  
express evanescence and hardness,  
vanity and anger, nothingness, or  
hideous and useless hate.....<sup>18</sup>

Life Ionesco, Beckett's play represent a feeling typical of our times. They reveal his experience of temporality, loneliness, the difficulty of communication in a human world, quest for reality in a world of uncertainty and disbelief, problem of identity, bewilderment created by the absence of some unifying principle. They present a picture of a disjointed world which is without meaning and purpose and create a haunting image of man and human destiny. His characters are not psychologically motivated but abstract and symbolic and in the opinion of some critics they are rather puppets. Vagueness and uncertainty are their characteristic features and the language they speak is also one of isolation. Beckett does not consider language as an adequate medium of expression. But feels that it fails to come to grip with basic dimensions of reality. His plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of Absurd. Instead of a linear plot, there

is spatial quality in his plays, different images, themes and metaphor interpenetrate each other and embody the meaning of the play. Like the other absurd dramatists, his plays employ a comic mode inspite of serious subject matter and tragic themes. And the more his characters suffer the more wildly they laugh. For them nothing is funnier than unhappiness. Winnie, the heroine of his play Happy Days explains this black humour by asking :

How can one better magnify the  
Almighty than by sniggering with  
him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?<sup>19</sup>

In Waiting For Godot Vladimir laughs at the fact of being born. Esslin characterises 'Waiting for Godot' as 'the saddest play and yet the funniest.'

Jean Genet is another important dramatist of this group. Martin Esslin finds in Genet's plays psychological truth, social protest and the hallmarks of absurd drama - the abandonment of character and motivation in favour of states of mind, devaluation of language as a means of communication, the rejection of didactic purpose and the theme of alienation, solitude and the search for meaning. Genet has based his plays on dream or fantasy and projects the impotence of individuals trapped in a conventional

society trying to find some meaning. Problem of illusion and reality, face and mask is the recurring theme in his plays.

Pinter like Albee belongs to the younger generation of Absurd playwrights who carry forward the tradition of absurd drama in a new context. Pinter's style as compared to the senior Absurd dramatists is more realistic and social context of his plays is more recognisable while in Ionesco and Beckett the social context is subdued and the style is more abstract. But Pinter is closest to Beckett in his temperament, intensity of conception and approach to language. They have similar perceptions, intellectual and moral preoccupations and dark vision. And Pinter admits his admiration of Beckett and comments :

You don't write in a vacuum; you're bound to absorb and digest other writing; and I admire Beckett's work so much that something of its texture might appear in my own. I myself have no idea whether this is so, but if it is then I am grateful for it.<sup>20</sup>

But inspite of this deep admiration and subtle influence of Beckett we find no borrowing in Pinter for

his technique is entirely his own. His early plays were christened 'Comedy of Menace'. These plays start in a very casual manner with every day events and the situations are always simple and realistic. The basic image in these plays is that of a room representing security. His characters are generally lonely persons trying to communicate with society but rejected. Then they try to find a cosy corner for themselves which will give them a sense of security. They build a niche for themselves and are scared of the world outside. But their sense of security is only temporary. For an intruder comes from the outside world and disturbs their lives. The intruder can be a person or an invisible force whether psychological, social, existential or metaphysical. And it takes the person out into this world of cold reality. The language Pinter uses is conversational and funny but beneath the surface simplicity lie a deeper layer of meaning which is <sup>S</sup> simpler as well as obliquely suggestive of ~~several~~ areas of meanings and which helps in creating an atmosphere of menace, mystery and ambiguity. Pinter himself has justified this term Comedy of Menace in a letter to Leonard Russell. He says that :

the laughter that accompanies his  
plays upto the point where they  
ceases to be funny is already the  
laughter of precaution against panic,  
the whistling in the dark of people

who are trying to protect themselves against the menace, the horror, which lies at the core of the action they are witnessing. The real menace which lies behind, the struggle for expression and communication behind the closed door which might spring open to reveal a frightening intruder behind sinister gunman and terrorists, behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images in the opaqueness, the uncertainty and the precariousness of human condition itself.<sup>21</sup>

Pinter conveys his ideas effectively through the use of verbal violence and with the help of his pauses, silences, repetitions and contradictory remarks. He makes a statement very clearly and then contradicts it and thus makes us doubt every thing. His characters are either unwilling to communicate at a deeper level or are incapable of doing so and they use language as a cover to conceal reality. Eric Berne in his work Games People Play popularised the belief that people play games to avoid the horrors of true intimacy. Almansi and Henderson point out that :

Pinter's games, in line with Berne's theory, are usually played in bad faith, as a flight from reality in the Sartrean sense..... His characters play games of chatting with people in the street as a way out of their isolation; games of conversation with their partners as an evasion of hostility; games of politeness on social occasions as if to smile away the barbarity of their lives; game of concern for the well being of others as if to avoid the awareness of self seeking; games of love as a defence against hatred or indifference; games of sincerity above all, to dispel the awful feeling that the word has no meaning whatever.<sup>22</sup>

And for them language often becomes a trap and an aspect of menace. They become more and more entangled. Pinter's concept of language is a significant contribution to absurd drama and is in tune with the general dissatisfaction with language with which modern literature, philosophy and art is preoccupied. In the following chapters a close look is given to his early plays including The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming and A Slight Ache as dark comedies and

comedies of Menace exhibiting Pinter's peculiar talent for exploring the darker dimensions, ambiguities and complexities of modern life.

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CHAPTER-II

THE ROOM AND THE DUMB WAITER

## CHAPTER- II

### The Room and The Dumb Waiter :-

These plays written in 1957 come first not only in chronological order but also have similarity in theme, form and symbolism. The striking feature is the use of closed room as the setting of these plays. As Prof. Zahida Zaidi in her article "Lower Depths and the Contemporary Theatre" remarked :

The setting of a closed space cut off from the outside world has assumed the significance of a powerful dramatic metaphor in modern drama projecting and symbolizing human predicament.<sup>1</sup>

She points out that plays like Pirandello's, Henry IV Sartre's No Exit, Beckett's Endgame, Genet's The Maids, Ionesco's The Chairs and several other plays like Amadee and The New Tenant etc. use this dramatic device in a powerful and significant way. "In the plays of Pinter", she further points out, "this setting is used with great dramatic force. It is both a symbol of his characters' isolation and a haven of refuge for them. But this protected haven is too fragile and is constantly threatened by external forces - violent, mysterious and inexplicable. In several of his plays like The Dumb Waiter,

The Room and The Birthday Party his grim comedy of Menace is enacted in the setting of a closed room or basement."<sup>2</sup>

The views of John Russell Taylor in his book Anger and After confirm some of these perception. According to him The Room, The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache and The Birthday Party :

..... all take place in confined surroundings in one room in fact, which represents for their protagonists at least a temporary refuge from the others ..... something they have shored up against their ruins. The menace comes from the outside, from the intruder whose arrival unsettles the warm, comfortable world bounded by four walls, and any intrusion can be menacing because the element of uncertainty and unpredictability the intruder brings with him is itself menacing.<sup>3</sup>

The setting of the play as well as its central theme is suggested by its title The Room and this closed room is occupied by an elderly couple Rose and Bert. Rose is incessantly talking while giving breakfast to her husband who is entirely withdrawn, silent and engrossed in the newspaper. The newspaper being another multidimensional symbol in Pinter's plays, Rose talks about the comforts and warmth of the room

they are living in, and the dampness, cold and darkness of the world outside. She is afraid of basement flat and people living there. She says :

It's very cold out, I can tell you.  
 It's murder.....the room keeps  
 warm. It's better than the basement,  
 away,.....I don't know how they live  
 down there..... I wouldn't like to  
 live in that basement.....I'm quite  
 happy where I am..... And we're  
 not bothered. And no body bothers us.<sup>4</sup>

This naturally reveals her ~~obsession~~ <sup>affection</sup> with her room and her fear of the outside world. But what strikes us particularly is the fact that all her assertions about her comfort and security are contradicted by the successive events of the play and gradually the menace enters into this secure haven in the form of the sinister inexplicable forces of the world around her and outside this closed room. Pinter himself has summed up this idea in the following words :

This old woman is living in a room,  
 which, she is convinced, is the best  
 in the house, and she refuses to know  
 any thing about the basement downstairs.

She says it's damp and nasty, and the world outside is cold and icy, and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. But, of course, it isn't; an intruder comes to upset the balance of every thing, in other words points to the delusion on which she is basing her life.<sup>5</sup>

Rose's fear of basement and outside world reveals her emotional insecurity and the room becomes the symbol of a private universe which she has built to give herself a sense of security. But it is arrived at the expense of a wider world which she is unable to come to terms with. But one cannot escape permanently the onslaught of this hostile world or one's own inner self and this security often turns out illusory, because some intruder comes from the outside world and disturbs the life of its occupants.

In the play there is a series of intruders although Rose claims that no one bothers them. The first intruder is Mr. Kidd, the landlord who is not certain about his family, property or anything. He talks about his family but when Rose asks what his younger sister died of he doesn't reply and after his departure Rose remarks :

"I don't believe he had a sister, ever."<sup>6</sup>

All this talk creates mystery and suspense inspite of the fact that the dialogue is often fuhhy. Rose's highly nervous and comic talk makes us feel from the very beginning that something sinister is going to happen. The use of pauses, silences and repetitions reveals the pre-occupations of characters and their states of mind and add to the atmosphere of mystery and menace.

After Mr. Kidd's departure Mr. and Mrs. Sand appear. They are searching for the landlord but do not think his name in Mr. Kidd. They rather confuse Mr. Hudd with the landlord and Rose's room with the vacant room they are looking for. This adds another sinister dimension to the situation. Mr. Kidd appears again and tells Rose that a person in the basement wants to see her in the absence of her husband. The person is an old blind Negro, named Riley. He gives a message to Rose that her father wants her to come home. She remains indifferent and tells him that she does not know him and the sooner he gets out the better. Then he says, 'Come home Sal.....I want you to come home.'<sup>7</sup> He calls her by the name of Sal and she does not object to it on the contrary she touches him on his eyes, head and temples. Suddenly Bert comes, sees the Negro, hits him on his head and Rose cries out 'I can't see'. She has become blind. Obviously there is no rational cause for her blindness and now we begin to feel that every event has a deeper layer



of meaning. Throughout the play we find her preoccupied with light, darkness and sight and in the end her promotion and fear turns out to be true. Bert's hitting of Riley is also an integral element of the play as Pinter has remarked that the violence that appears in his plays is "an essential and inevitable factor growing out of the nature of the modern world as he sees it."<sup>8</sup>

Thus the play is creating this universe to suggest the hidden violence, sinister quality and the incomprehensibility of existence for the common vulnerable humanity. Consequently they find it impossible to cope with it. Seen this way we feel that Rose's seclusion is a deliberate withdrawal from the world and the danger it involves, also that she can relate herself only to a selective area of existence and can get comfort in her cocoon or womb like existence which in itself is temporary. The play conveys a sense of anguish and a desperate attempt to belong to something, someone and somewhere. But on the other hand there is a hidden fear in the mind of Rose that this is not going to last. The play which started with everyday events and ordinary things ends up suggesting something extensive and universal. Pinter exposes the frustration and failure of human communications and alienation of individuals from their fellow human beings and a social system in which they do not fit or with which they are unable to cope and therefore alienated.

But this Comedy of Menace with mysterious and sinister

dimensions can also be seen as a psycho drama taking place in the mind of the central character. Seen from this point of view the setting, the action and various characters that appear from time to time, and various other images and suggestions that the play contains can be seen as diverse fragments and various aspects of Rose's inner state and psychic experiences. Her fear of basement e.g. can be seen as the fear of the deeper dimension of the self and the unconscious mind. Riley e.g. can be seen as representing some hidden guilt in her character and her own sudden blindness is only a symbolic projection of her blindness to deeper and more challenging dimensions of reality and may be in a sense it is a new awakening. If we take this point of view then the husband who has been a distant, withdrawn and possibly rejected aspect of her being is the source of her awakening.

The Dumb Waiter presents a somewhat similar situation. Again we are confronted with <sup>a</sup>room and outside it a dark mysterious world. The play centers upon two people Ben and Gus, professional killers who are waiting for instructions as to when their victim will enter. Their very presence has an element of mystery. Ben is the senior partner, reading a newspaper and telling bits of interesting news to Gus who frequently asks questions about one thing or the other. While they wait for their victim they talk about

football matches. First Eleven Cricketers' photograph on the wall, the faulty flush-system in the toilet etc. Ben repeatedly asks questions about the workings of their organization. Suddenly an envelope slides under the door which fills the atmosphere of the room with greater suspense which the repeated reference from the very beginning that whoever will enter the door will have to die has already been created. Pinter in the programme note of The Room and The Dumb Waiter remarks :

Given a man in a room and he will sooner or later receive a visitor. A visitor entering the room will enter with intent. If two people inhabit the room the visitor will not be the same man for both. A man in a room who receives a visit is likely to be illuminated or horrified by it. The visitor himself might as easily be horrified or illuminated..... A man in a room and no one entering lives in expectation of a visit. He will be illuminated or horrified by the absence of a visitor. But however much it is expected, the entrance, when it comes, is unexpected and almost always unwelcome. 9

But the intruder in this play is the dumb-waiter who suddenly starts working asking for different types of food. They send up every thing they have and feel sorry for not fulfilling all of its demands. The episode of the dumb-waiter can be seen symbolically as man's attempt to respond as best he can to the demands of the outside world. B.F. Dukore suggests three possible interpretations of the Dumb-Waiter. Firstly the machine with its inexplicable ascents and descents which refers to the arbitrary and irrational universe in which man finds himself. Secondly it may refer to Gus, the inquisitive killer who from asking questions about trivial things, starts asking about matters concerning their organization. Since the question about the organization he may threaten it or disturb it. But like Rose, his nervous questioning reveals his insecurity, and lack of confidence. Thirdly the Dumb-Waiter may also refer to Ben, who is dumb in accepting orders, never questioning the authority or showing any curiosity about its motives and actions.<sup>10</sup> Since these points are not mutually exclusive, the title may refer to all. But the first point seems to me more significant and relevant. It takes us into deeper layers of meaning. In modern times man has become a slave to machine. He is a victim of sinister and mysterious patterns evolved by machine. Ben and Gus work according to the orders of machine and try to satisfy the source of threat. It also suggests man's predicament in an incomprehensive universe and his efforts to somehow cope with it.

Which Gus is in the toilet Ben receives the orders from the speaking-tube. It is Gus who is the victim and on his return from toilet he faces Ben's revolver and his blank stare. The position of the two killers itself has an element of mystery and ambiguity. They are in a precarious state and ultimately one is annihilated by the other on the orders of the dumb-waiter. Seen this way man is no better than a wild animal in the forest where it is a matter of the survival of the fittest, and no one knows who is going to kill whom. Man is a victim of violence and is at the mercy of mysterious invisible forces. The social system makes human life insecure and uncertain. According to Martin Esslin "the supernatural forces which come into play are expression of the sub-conscious motivations of characters." He remarks :

What it is that the supernatural  
 trappings of the play describe;  
 no more and no less than the process  
 of alienation to which men are  
 subjected in a highly organized  
 industrial society, which denies to  
 the individual particularly the  
 individual of low intelligence and  
 insight in the lower ranks, any  
 real understanding of its working:  
 and the frustration this engenders  
 the violence into which this frustra-  
 tion is bound to erupt.....<sup>11</sup>

Thus the failure on the part of Gus and Ben to understand the working of their organization, their frustration and irritation find expression in their conversation and in their difficulties of communication. For Pinter language is the most sophisticated means of non-communication. In one of his interviews he remarks:

I feel... that instead of any inability to communicate, there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Pinter's characters talk in order to avoid their reality. Sinister meanings are conveyed with the help of colloquial dialogue, and menace is created with the help of comic dialogues. The argument over what is the correct phrase, light the kettle or put on the kettle is very funny. Similarly the Dumb-waiter's demand for unusual dishes and their inadequate supply is also funny. The small talks about news paper events, about the victim etc. are wildly comic but behind it is lurking the anxiety

of the two killers. And they use language as a cover for their fears and aloneness.

Upto a certain point the play moves on realistic level. All the events are unexpected, extra ordinary and mysterious but realistic. Suspense in the play is not for the sake of sensation. It reveals the sinister dimension of reality. Pinter is using concrete devices of theatre to convey his meaning more effectively. The machine with its mysterious message conveys and embodies the meaning of the play which is unfolded gradually and which comes with a suddenness and force in the end and gives a great intensity to the play. It indicates uncertainty and unpredictability in our lives as well as in the contemporary social and political system. The violence in the play is suggestive of the mood of modern times. The characters' alienation is suggestive of their inability to cope with a world which has become complicated and in which man has become insignificant.

These two early plays are brief and terse. They reveal Pinter's social and moral concerns. They are very gripping, hardly any dialogue or image seems to be superfluous. They add to the meaning of the play, although at first they appear irrelevant. Actually these plays represent a stage of development in Pinter's career in which he tried to master his medium and it gave him confidence to undertake more ambitious ventures in The Birthday Party and The Caretaker.

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CHAPTER-III

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY AND THE CARETAKER

### CHAPTER - III

#### The Birthday Party and The Caretaker :

The Birthday Party is Pinter's first full-length written in the same period as The Room and The Dumb Waiter and deriving elements from both. The play opens in the same way as The Room with Petey sitting at break-fast table, reading the newspaper and Meg his wife asking meaningless questions. Petey is reading out bits of interesting news to Meg like Ben does in The Dumb Waiter. They talk about their lodger, Stanley Webber. Meg treats him as a child although he is a man in his late thirties. It is suggested through the dialogue that he was a pianist who once gave a concert at Lower Edmonton and was booked for another but when he reached there he found the gates were all closed. And now he is hiding himself in this boarding house afraid of light, going out and the world outside. The play opens in the most realistic and ordinary way and the dialogue is very close to everyday conversation. The initial situation is plausible, down to earth and inconsequential and we feel seduced by it. But language is a kind of trap in Pinter's hands where everyday dialogue turns into something sinister. As John Russell Brown has observed :

Pinter's dialogue is contrived, so that, when a radically new situation is at last presented, the audience has already sensed the subtle and slow-developing movements which make it inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

Language also helps in creating an atmosphere of mystery and ambiguity. There is a kind of mystery about the boarding house and we are not sure whether it is on the list or not. The hints that are given about Stanley's past are also of contradictory nature and instead of helping us in understanding his past, they envelope it in mystery. The reference to concert also has a sinister quality. We come to know that he once gave a concert and when he went for another he found the gates were locked without any reason\$. It indicates that society with its sinister forces deprives an individual particularly an individual of creative potential of his dignity. We find that Stanley never rose to the level of a serious artist recognized by discerning people. It also reveals his fear of freedom and incapacity for commitment. This incident ended in his complete withdrawal from the world and from that point the process of his downfall began.

Thus Pinter prepared us from the very beginning for something sinister. The relationship of Meg with Stanley is both motherly and coquettish, and Stanley's attitude towards Meg is complicated and ambiguous. Stanley's game

of warning Meg that some intruders will come in a van to take her is suggestive of his own hidden fears, anxiety, sense of guilt and insecurity. All this contributes to the total impact of the play in which the comedy is blended well with sinister elements. As the title of the play suggests the play incorporates a birthday party. This is given by Meg in honour of Stanley although he insists it is not his birthday. This is another example of Pinter's ambiguous technique of enveloping everything in uncertainty. Meg gives Stanley a boy's drum as his birthday present which has several dimensions of meaning as Ronald Hayman puts it :

It sums up the old woman's  
attitude to the substitute son  
who can't bear her but hasn't  
got the strength to escape.  
Like Rose's chatter to Bert,  
Meg's fussy attentiveness shows  
the wish to give and receive  
attention, combined with an  
insulting reduction of the grown  
man to the status of a little boy.  
The present of a toy is an ingenious  
attempt to give to the failed  
musician something that will  
make up for his not having a piano.<sup>2</sup>

It can also be seen as indicating Stanley's degeneration as an artist and also as a human being. Some of the things that appear quite ordinary in the beginning add to the tensions of the play by revealing their sinister potential like the arrival of Goldberg and Mc Cann which might appear as a normal occurrence at the face of it but is not so. To begin with they behave quite normally and realistically and appear to be very sociable. They approach Stanley in a friendly way and it is Stanley who is aggressive and insulting. But as the play unfolds itself the sinister dimension of their characters is revealed and so the menace does not seem to be super imposed but is an inevitable development of a normal and plausible situation. They force Stanley to take a seat although without using any violence but suggesting the possibility if it becomes necessary and start interrogating him menacingly. They ask apparently illogical, incoherent and meaningless question and it creates an atmosphere of terror and mystery.

They ask contradictory questions such as "Why did you kill your wife?" and then "Why did you never get married" and puzzling questions like "Is the number 846 possible or necessary" and "Which came first? Chicken? Egg? Which came first?" They accuse him of betraying the land, breed and organization. In the end they charge him of sterility - physical, emotional and mental.

Goldberg : What makes you think you exist?  
 Mc Cann : You're dead.  
 Goldberg : You're dead. You can't live, you can't  
 think, you can't love. You're dead.  
 You're a plague gone bad. There's no  
 juice in you. You're nothing but an  
 odour.<sup>3</sup>

Stanley after making some attempts to answer their questions, gives up and is capable of uttering only sounds which suggest his total breakdown. Goldberg and Mc Cann appear to be typically bourgeois characters. They can be seen as representing a middle class which has a grip over entire society. They can also be seen as "Organization Man" or the very embodiment of organization itself. They are also representatives of hidden violence in society. They represent conformist forces and terrorise Stanley into conformity. And in due course of time Stanley is reduced to pulp. They can also be seen as surrealistic characters, projecting the conflict or hidden fear in the mind of Stanley himself. The entire scene can be looked at as taking place in the mind of Stanley. It happens in the absence of Meg and Lulu.

In the party they play the game of Blind Man's Buff and when Stanley's turn comes for a blind man, Mc Cann takes off his spectacles and breaks them. When the party

is at its climax, the lights suddenly go out and in the dark Stanley tries to strangle Meg the mother figure and then rape Lulu which could suggest his breaking of the umbilical chord with the mother-figure and relate himself to a younger woman in sexual relation but in the context of the play this explanation too is questionable.

In the final scene the intruders' business of brain washing is complete. They dress Stanley in a dark suit and take him out as a "New man". The sinister pressures of conformity on the individual are now fully triumphant. In this play menace is dramatised, embodied and verbalized with all its sinister power and harrowing attitude. Harold Hobson has remarked :

Mr. Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster ... There is something in your past - it does not matter what - which will catch up with you. Though you go to the uttermost part of the earth, and hide yourself in the most obscure lodgings in the least popular of towns, one day there is a possibility that two men will appear. They will be looking for you and you cannot get away. And someone will be looking for them,

too. There is terror everywhere....  
 the fact that no one can say precisely  
 why it is that Stanley is so frightened  
 by them is, of course one of its greatest  
 merits. It is exactly in this vagueness  
 that its spine chilling quality lies.<sup>4</sup>

Hobson interprets it in psychological terms also suggesting the menace, horror and mystery in society as a whole. His interpretation focusses on the action of the play. Baker and Tabachnik interpret it as an autobiographical play saying in this play :

Pinter has portrayed the relations of a Jewish artist and his bourgeois community. Stanley appears as the assimilated Jewish artist, who has left the group in order to try to practise his art - perhaps like Pinter himself - instead of becoming a businessman, who is hypocritically attacked by the group itself for his action.....Pinter in The Birthday Party is writing about himself, the assimilated Jewish artist who wrestles with feelings of guilt for betrayal of the group.<sup>5</sup>



But this interpretation seems to me rather narrow in its scope for it does not give due recognition to the subtlety of Pinter's technique and the complexity of the play. On the other hand Martin Esslin recognizing the complexity of the play and dimensionality of its themes, suggests various interpretations. In the first place he points out that it can be an allegory of the pressures of conformity. Stanley, the pianist, is forced into respectability by the representatives of the bourgeois world. It can be seen as an allegory of death - man snatched away from the home he has built for himself by the dark angels of nothingness. Or it can be seen as individual's pathetic search for security from anxieties and terrorism of modern world.<sup>6</sup>

The second interpretation by Esslin seems to be most convincing because the play deals with the theme of death at various levels and culminating in the spiritual death of Stanley and although the play - is called the Birthday Party it actually turns out to be a death day of Stanley who degenerates first as an artist, then as an individual and in the end as a human being. He is almost like a corpse in the end. Actually all these interpretations illuminate one aspect of the play or another but they are not a final word on it. They suggest its complexity by opening ways for other interpretations. This is Pinter's most complex and thorough going comedy of menace.

The Caretaker Pinter's second full length play, was written in 1959. In this play again the setting is a room representing security which is shattered in the usual Pinterish way by the event of an intruder from the outside world. There are three male characters in the play. Mick and Aston are brothers. The ownership of the room is a controversial question because it belongs to Mick although Aston as an occupant has certain rights. Aston's room is full of junk and has a leaking ceiling. Here in this play again there is a vagueness about other rooms in this huge house. When enquired about other rooms, Aston says 'They are out of commission' and 'They need a lot of doing to' Aston brings an old man Davies to live with him who as we are informed worked as a cleaner in a cafe where he refused to remove a bucket of rubbish and had a fight in which Aston saved him from being beaten up.

We come to know about Davies' race-hatred by his repeated reference to the blacks, also that he is going under an assumed name of Jenkins and his real name is Mac Davies. He frequently talks about going to sidcup to get some papers although we feel that he is not really interested in going any where. Aston offers Davies to stay with him until he gets fixed up somewhere. Getting a place to live Davies becomes progressively demanding and starts acting as if the room belongs to him.

Aston is shown as a very helping and kind person and in spite of Davies' ill-nature he offers him a job as caretaker. He tries to befriend Davies and tells him his experience in the mental hospital. But Davies is a wicked old man who finds fault with everything Aston offers, from shoes to the people living next door. He has no gratitude for Aston and starts even complaining about him to Mick to win the latter's favour because he found him more assertive and powerful.

Mick in his first encounter with Davies threatens him and then interrogates him. But his attitude towards Davies is sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile, thus bewildering. He tries to relate Davies to his uncle's brother but is not sure whether the uncle was the brother or reverse. He tempts Davies by telling him his plan of redecorating the house and turning it into a pent-house and offers him the job of caretaker.

Davies tries to play the brothers off. He tells Mick about the fight he had with Aston in which Aston told him to find some other place. Mick listens to his description sympathetically but when Davies starts calling names to Aston and suggesting he should go back to the place where he came from (the mental hospital) Mick changes his attitude suddenly. Actually there is a certain type of harmony between Mick and Aston, some adjustment. But the

appearance of an outsider all but breaks this harmony. Davies' attitude is totally anti-social. He wants to dominate the secure place of Aston but Mick will not allow this. He calls Davies an impostor who pretended to know about interior decoration and tells him:

Ever since you come into this house  
there's been nothing but trouble.  
Honest. I can take nothing you say  
at face value. Every word you speak  
is open to any number of different  
interpretations. Most of what you  
say is lies. You're violent, you're  
erratic, you're just completely  
unpredictable. You're nothing else  
but a wild animal, when you come down  
to it. You're a barbarian. And to  
put the old tin lid on it, you stink  
from arse-hole to breakfast time.<sup>7</sup>

Davies then tries to reconcile with Aston but fails and the play ends with his long desperate appeal to let him stay. Thus because of his evil nature Davies has lost the place of refuge. His demands for shoes, money, a different bed, clock finally for displacement of Aston

and total possession of the room lead to his disaster.

According to Baker and Tabachnik :

The Caretaker from first to last details Davies' struggle to consolidate his position in his new found room, a card house that he builds in the air, and the collapse of his house of hopes. In the end, despite his best efforts at survival in the way he knows how, his humanity is brutally and totally denied, and he becomes an 'animal' in society's regard.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Davies is unable to come to terms with society. He attempts vainly for his sense of dignity in an indifferent society to prove that he exists and has rights. He thinks himself superior to 'them Blacks' and 'aliens' but he himself is an outsider, a person never accepted by society and his hatred for the blacks is only a means of projecting his self image on others. His failure in getting down to sidcup is also suggestive that he doesn't have any identity which he can prove.

Ruby cohn suggests that :

Mick and Aston represent the system,  
which crushes Davies. They tantalize  
him with faint hope in order to crush  
him all the more completely at the end.<sup>9</sup>

But how can Aston be the representative of that  
system, of which he himself is a victim. Society in the  
shape of medical authorities crushed Aston who was an  
imaginative and sensitive person. He is deprived of his  
vitality and his right to have different perception of  
reality. Consequently he is rendered passive through a  
surgical operation.

Thus in this play menace is society which is  
destroying creativity. But Aston is a person who would  
not surrender his individuality. He has found another  
dimension of creativity in manual work. The shed which  
he is trying to build is a symbol of his recovered sanity  
and a starting point for a new life. Aston's insensitivity  
to the menace all-around him is symbolized in his statue  
of the Buddha which becomes an image of his charity and  
tolerance as has been rightly pointed out by Almansi and  
Henderson. They further comment that Mick by smashing the  
Buddha in the final act wants to make a dramatic impact on  
Davies and also tries to bring Aston out of his desensitized  
stupor. And he achieves the desired effect because when  
Aston comes and sees the broken Buddha he looks at the pieces

for a moment and then deliberately turns his back on Davies symbolizing total rejection of the old man.<sup>10</sup>

The action of this play is more realistic and simpler than the action of other plays by Pinter. But this realistic situation is explored in all its sinister dimensions. The play is often very funny, effective and even moving. But the surface humour of the play is threatening inside as Pinter himself has commented in a letter to the Times :

As far as I'm concerned, The  
caretaker is funny upto a point.  
Beyond that point it ceases to be  
funny and it was because of that  
point that I wrote it.<sup>11</sup>

The character of Davies is both funny and pathetic. Act 2 contains the visual comedy of bag taking. The speech in which Mick relates Davies to his uncle is funny and full of irrelevencies. Then we have comedy by repetition and incogruities. But this humour is only a means of intensifying the irony of situation. When Mick frightens Davies in the dark by starting the electrolux and Davies takes out his knife to defend himself all laughter becomes menacing. It is Mick who uses physical violence and practical tricks on Davies and produces suspense and tension in the play. Thus we see the internal interaction

of characters and their contradictions developing the action. The play is poignant in details and language. Skillful manipulation of material adds to the ambiguity of the play. Pinter is revealing hypocrisy in human relations through the conversation which is full of double meaning and deception. It also suggests lack of communication at a deeper level.

In this play the room is a place of questionable security. Davies, Aston and Mick each can be seen in terms of his wishes about the room. For Davies, it represents a goal, a secure and final place in society that he must achieve at all costs but at the same time, it represents a threat because it is a place where his enemies could locate him and he refuses the offer of a job as a caretaker only for this reason. For Aston it would mean the regaining of his mental ability if he could decorate it. And for Mick the room is a financial ideal and he thinks of turning it into a pent-house. Actually Mick is the prototype of a successful man and Aston and Davies are drop-outs in different ways. The play relates to the Birthday Party where a would be artist is crushed by society and ironed out into conformity. Pinter's approach is sympathetic but he is also revealing the narrowness of vision which is at the mercy of violence and menace deeply rooted in society. These two plays are a novel dramatisation of his idea of comedy of menace which is grim and dark.

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#### CHAPTER-IV

#### THE HOMECOMING AND A SLIGHT ACHE

## CHAPTER - IV

### The Homecoming and A Slight Ache :

The Homecoming is Pinter's third full length play written in 1964. The play introduces a male family. Max a man about seventy years old is living with his two sons Lenny and Joey and a brother Sam. The opening dialogue of the play is vogue and repetitive as in the earlier plays. Max, the father, we are informed, is a retired butcher who now cooks for the family. Sam his younger brother is a private chauffeur in some firm. Joey is an amateur boxer and he also works in a demolition firm. But we are not sure about Lenny's profession in the beginning. Thus the family seems quite respectable although not very cultured or sophisticated. They are loud-mouthed and aggressive. Max and his sons' attitude towards Sam is hostile. Max tells Sam that he is keeping him only because he is an earning member of the family and the day he stops bringing money he will be thrown out. The sons' attitude towards their father is also aggressive particularly of Lenny. Max talks about his closest friend Max Gregor who was his companion in the butcher's profession. There is no woman in the house but we somehow feel the absence of one. The character of Boy's late mother Jessie is built-up

through suggestions, and we feel that the sons are interested in knowing more about their mother. The play opens in an ordinary way only a little bit of ambiguity is created by references to Mac and Jessie whose characters are enveloped in mystery. The general atmosphere at this stage is not that of comedy of menace as we find in other Pinter plays but some ambiguous suggestions about Lenny's profession create tension.

In the next scene it is night and everybody is in bed when two visitors arrive - Teddy who is Max's eldest son and lives in America where he is a Professor of Philosophy and Ruth his wife. They have been on a trip to Italy and on their way back Teddy has decided to visit his house and to introduce Ruth to his family. Teddy has a key of the front-door and they enter the house without waking anyone. He wants Ruth to come to bed with him in his own bed room but she expresses a desire for a stroll at this late hour of night which is surprising and makes one uncomfortable about the situation and about her personality. As she goes out, Lenny comes and the meeting between two brothers is very formal. When Teddy goes in his room, Ruth comes back from her stroll and the meeting between Ruth and Lenny, whose identity he does not know as yet, is also very casual. He is not at all surprised to see a woman in his house at midnight. He inquires

"You must be connected with my brother in some way. The one who's been abroad."<sup>1</sup> When she tells him she is his brother's wife, he does not pay any attention to it and starts talking about his insomnia. Then he starts relating stories which we feel are invented on the spur of the moment. He tells Ruth about a lady whom he beat up because he decided that she was deceased. Then relates another story in which he decided to help an old lady in lifting her iron-mangle but refused to help because the old woman herself was not very cooperative. All these stories reveal that his attitude towards women is insulting and degrading and gives us a clue about his profession which was earlier enveloped in mystery. After the stories there is a fight between Ruth and Lenny over a glass of water. This fight is symbolic. The fight over something as trivial as a glass of water can not be possibly taken literally. It is Ruth who wins and thus establishes her supermacy.

Next morning, Teddy and Ruth come to meet Max who gets angry because he has not been told of his son's arrival and on seeing Ruth he calls <sup>her a</sup> 'Tart' Teddy tries to tell his father that she is his wife but Max comments "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother

died."<sup>2</sup> This sentence has double meaning and suggests some sinister possibility of the situation. Then suddenly he asks Ruth if she is a mother and when she tells that she has three children, he is pacified.

Act 2 begins when the whole family is sitting for a cup of coffee after lunch and everyone is seen here in his best behaviour. Teddy tells about his life in the University and about his three boys. Lenny asks Teddy a question and this question is "What is a table philosophically speaking?" and when Teddy is unable to answer Ruth philosophizes it in her own way which has sinister undertones. She says :

Look at me. I..... move my leg.  
That's all it is. But I wear....  
Underwear... which moves with me  
... it ... captures your attention.  
Perhaps you misinterpret. The action  
is simple. It's a leg... moving. My  
lips move. Why don't you restrict  
... your observations to that? Perhaps  
the fact that they move is more  
significant... than the words which  
come through them. You must bear  
that possibility ... in mind.<sup>3</sup>

This speech can be seen as a critique of Teddy's philosophy which is abstract and bookish. He is only a teacher of philosophy. His philosophical ideas do not have any impact on his thinking, behaviour, way of living and moral values. It also gives some suggestions about Ruth's intentions. She tells Lenny that she was a nude model before she married Teddy and that America is all rocks and sands. Obviously she is dissatisfied with her "respectable" married life in America. Teddy notices a sinister change in his family's attitude and suggests they should leave although he had come with the intention of staying. Teddy's proposal might be a result of his apprehension that she is going to reveal her past but what is menacing is that his proposal is neither accepted nor refused by his wife. She is totally indifferent to it. Lenny proposes a dance before they leave and while dancing he kisses Ruth. When Joey sees this he remarks : "Christ, she's wide open. Dad, look at that ..... She's a tart".<sup>4</sup>

Then he takes her from Lenny's arms and starts making love to her in the presence of everybody which ends in a surprising way when Ruth asks for something to eat and also a drink. She has become demanding and assertive.

In the next scene we are told that Joey and Ruth are in a room for several hours. The most shocking thing is that Teddy is not worried at all. On the contrary the

the family dicusses her sexual habits very shamelessly and casually. She has become a sex object for the entire family. Max makes the proposal of keeping her for sometime as they have been missing a woman in the house and everybody is ready to contribute for her living. But Lenny suggests that she can earn her living by being a part-time prostitute. Teddy does not object to it and it is he who makes the proposal to Ruth and tells her that the children can manage without her and she can come back to her children when she grows old. Teddy's shameless offer is highly disturbing but what is more disturbing in the fact that Ruth accepts the offer without the slightest degree of protest. On the contrary she starts dictating terms. She is as casual about it as the family. She asks for a three room flat, a bathroom, a personal maid to set her up as a prostitute and is not ready to pay back the capital investment. They even ask Teddy to recommend her to professors coming on a trip to Europe for which they would give him commission. When all this talk is going on, Sam reveals that Jessie had a liason with Mac in his car and collapses, he appears to be almost dead but it does not make any difference to any of them.

The whole thing is extremely bewildering, shocking and disturbing. A respectable Professor's wife who is also a mother deliberately chooses to be a high class whore. In the first act she is called a 'tart' by Max, in act two she



introduces herself as one in the scene with Lenny and Joey and in the end she establishes herself as one. One explanation of this state of affairs as upheld by Esslin is that prostitution is in family business. Max was a butcher by profession which might symbolically suggest he was in flesh-trade. Jessie was a loose woman and her husband mentions her as a whore "I have never had a whore under this roof. Ever since your mother died " Max tells Ruth that Jessie taught her boys all the morality they have and this is ironic because the boys do not have any moral values. Lenny has inherited the family tradition by being a pimp. Esslin goes to the extent of saying that it is also likely that Sam who is a chauffeur is some firm might have been in his youth a driver for prostitutes run by Max and Mac Gregor. But this is a one-sided interpretation based on several presumptions. Infact if we stick to the text it is sufficiently evident that with the exception of Lenny other members of the family are connected with the so-called "respectable" professions. Max has been a butcher and Sam is a driver. Joey's profession is also respectable. Ruth was a model but it does not necessarily suggest prostitution and Teddy is a Professor. So it is a respectable family unit. But what is worth noticing is the fact that this respectability is skinny. Beneath the facade of this respectability lies the dirt. Ruth is taken as a sex object who can satisfy the demands of the entire family

and then she is turned into a regular prostitute, and her brother-in-laws and even her husband become her pimps - while they are getting sexual satisfaction they also want money through her and this is the extent to which they are degraded. As Pinter, however, has said :

She's mininterpreted deliberately and used by this family but eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says "if you want to play this game I can play it as well as you".<sup>5</sup>

While one cannot disagree with Pinter's statement it is necessary to point out that drama as a whole represent society and shows a general degradation in the moral outlook of the people in the contemporary society.

Martin Esslin - also interprets this play as a dream image of the fulfillment of all Oedipal wishes. Ruth is both a mother and whore. The boys have found a woman young and beautiful for sexual satisfaction as well as a mother figure. Joey would like to have complete possession of her without any rival. Lenny has also been interested in his mother sexually and the personality of their dead mother Jessie haunts throughout the play. Their hospitality towards their father is indication of the fact.<sup>6</sup> But to us it seems that the play is something more than a mere wish fulfillment of Oedipal desires although there is an element of surrealistic dream and Oedipal complex in the play which explains its strange fascination.

The drama shows the degradation of society and is a ruthless critique of the ways of society. It dramatises moral depravity not in an individual character but in the social milieu as a whole. It is a contemporary situation and we find it happening all around us. Similar is the situation in Everything in the Garden by Edward Albee where a respectable woman of 33 with children accepts prostitution simply to improve her standard of living. Her family knows about it and is supporting it indirectly. The only person against it is the man who is killed by the family and is lying buried in the garden. He is a silent observer of this phenomenon of existence some what like Sam in the play who is a realistic as well as a symbolic character. He represents conscience. His profession is also symbolic which allows him to observe but not to intervene. It is he who knows the true nature of Jessie and when he finds things repeating themselves reveals the truth and collapses. The phenomenon of degeneration is overwhelming but he is helpless and can do nothing about the uplift of society. So this conscience is crippled. In Everything in the Garden the author's attitude is quite clear but here it is presented in a more acute and subtle manner. In this play the harrowing situation is going from bad to worse as can be seen in the goings on of the two respective generations. The situation also superficially seems closer to Mourning Becomes Electra by O'Neill where Christine finds satisfaction in extra marital affair

with Adam Brant but it is resented by Lavinia and also it is not degrading because it is the result of dissatisfaction in her married life and the absence of vitality and passion in her relation with her husband. In the Homecoming both husband and wife are equally indifferent to each other and it seems that their marriage is on a breaking point. But Ruth's acceptance of the alternative of prostitution in a cold and insensitive way is degrading and shows the loss of moral values and sense of commitment. Similarly in Three Sisters by Chekhov Andrey is betrayed by Natasha who soon after her marriage is having affair with Protopopov and is probably the mother of an illegitimate child. He feels it strongly and so do the other members of the family. But he is a weak person and can do nothing about it and so closes his eyes. But here also the play dramatises the moral depravity and degeneration of one individual character and not of society as a whole. But here in this play Pinter is criticising the whole social milieu through this family. Beneath the layers of rationality and sophistication lies man's animal nature. They do not have any human values, feelings and standards. There is a total absence of values - a moral void.

The play creates mystery and ambiguity but it is also very gripping. The shocking thing is that it discusses most vulgar things in the most casual manner. The external

action of the play is very simple and realistic. The play is full of verbal as well as physical violence and threats. Images of blood and butchery pervade the play. The characters are destructive as well as threatening. The play is savage but it is comic too. In this play no external force comes as menace the menace resides at the very root of existence, the situation itself is menacing.

A Slight Ache written in 1958 is originally a radio play which was later televised. The play presents a respectable middle class couple, Edward and Flora. Everything is in perfect shape in their house-hold and their life style is an exact replica of other middle class families. This is the first play by Pinter where action is not confined to a closed room representing security. Here their conventional and respectable life style itself is suggestive of a secure existence. The play starts in the usual Pinterish manner on a breakfast table with the husband reading a news-paper. Arlene Sykes points out that newspaper is "One of the most effective barriers to communication devised by man"<sup>7</sup>. Pinter uses newspaper in several of his plays to produce an alienating effect. Chekhov uses it as a symbol of ignorance in his play Three Sisters and it is used by Beckett and Ionesco in Happy Days and The Bald Prima Donna in a peculiarly absurd manner.

At the beginning of the play Edward and Flora are talking about flowers which instead of communicating something creates confusion. Suddenly they see a wasp in the marmalade bottle which can be seen as a disturbance in their set routine life. The wasp in the marmalade bottle is the first intruder and they try to kill it. With the killing of wasp comes 'slight ache' in Edward's eyes which can be interpreted as the second intruder. The third intruder is the match-seller who stands outside the back gate of their house. He has been standing there for weeks without ever selling anything. They decide to invite him inside the house. The match seller seems a harmless old man to Flora but Edward is frightened by his presence. They call him in and both talk to him in turn but the match seller does not speak a word in the course of the play. Edward tells him his life history, personal experiences and pleads desperately for communication but the match seller remains silent. Flora when alone with the match-seller talks to him about sex and seduces him by calling him 'Barnabas'. Baker and Tabachnik point out that "she associates him with sexuality, for Barnabas was an early Christian father who disagreed strongly with St. Paul the apostle of chastity".<sup>8</sup> The play ends at a point when Edward loses control of himself and collapses and Flora gives him the match-seller's tray and takes the match-seller out into the garden for lunch.

Martin Esslin points out :

For Edward the match-seller is the focal point of his anxiety, he may indeed be that which starts as a slight ache and ends with Edward's loss of his personality - perhaps even his sight - and his expulsion from Flora's bed.<sup>9</sup>

For Flora he represents a return to sex and to life.

Thus we feel the three images of menace are inter-related. Something as trivial and insignificant as the wasp incident leads to devastating consequences. Their insecurities and anxieties are revealed in relation to the wasp and the match-seller, and their even flow of life turns out to be quite hollow and precarious,

Bernard F. Dukore remarks :

In *A Slight Ache* the menace is an external manifestation of internal psychological disturbance. Confronted with it, the shattering individual cannot maintain his equilibrium.<sup>10</sup>

He further remarks that Edward's physical ache is a manifestation of his psychological ache as he deteriorates to the point of helplessness. This point seems to us quite valid for Edward's precarious sense of security is shaken by the intervention of his mysterious force. The match~~tray~~

given to him at the end of the play is symbol of his dispossession, and he is dispossessed in more than one ways. He is dispossessed of his home, his wife and his sense of security. His respectable way of life is shattered. And his premonition has proved correct like the premonitions of Rose, Ben and Gus and Stanley. As far as Flora is concerned her suppressed sexuality becomes overt by the appearance of this inexplicable force of existence and she loses hold on the respectable mode of sexual satisfaction.

Thus we see this short play is a variation on the theme of menace. The play is a critique of middle class way of life and their respectability. It reveals the anguish, anxieties, insecurities and hollowness of their existence. The initial situation of the play is realistic but the menace is lurking at so many levels and this realistic situation is transformed into something symbolic with the help of various images which merge into each other. Language as a trap is used very effectively in this drama and the play is an artistic success.

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## CONCLUSION

### CONCLUSION

Pinter's comedy of menace is an intensification of the concept of dark comedy. Pinter was first labelled as an absurd dramatist. Like Beckett and Kafka Pinter is of the view that existential experience predetermines one's attitude towards society, politics and general ideas. Pinter deals with existential and metaphysical themes like other absurd playwrights and in his approach and style he has some similarity with Beckett. But Pinter developed in his own individual way and his approach in early plays is best characterized as Comedy of Menace which can be seen as a particular manifestation of the absurd tradition.

Pinter's plays reflect contemporary British society, its false value system and the menace existing within and without. Compared to the other absurd dramatists he is much closer to the earth and the problems of the contemporary man. He has tried to probe deep in the experiences of modern man and the dehumanization of man in society. His characters in the plays discussed here are lonely persons living in their own private worlds.

They enclose themselves in a false haven of security by building a niche for themselves but they are basically insecure persons and are constantly threatened by their own psychic experiences as well as by forces which can at any time disturb the precarious balance of their existence. These can be in the shape of psychological forces as in the play The Room or hidden violence in society as in The Dumb Waiter or the conformist forces as in The Birthday Party. These sinister forces are seen as destroying individuality and creativity.

In the play The Room, Rose the central character is obsessed with the safety of her room and frightened of the cold, dark and dangerous outside world. She is a psychologically insecure person, afraid of coming into contact with the naked world. She feels secure in her haven of refuge but intruders come and disturb her sense of security. Presumably she feels alienated because she is unable to communicate with a society which is complicated, mechanical and full of violence. In The Dumb Waiter Pinter exposes the dehumanization of man by the mechanization of life. In contemporary society man has become insignificant and is like a slave to the machine. In the play the two characters Ben and Gus work according to the orders of machine and in the

end Gus is murdered by his partner on the instructions of this machine. The mechanization of society has made man impersonal and insensitive and in this cold and lifeless atmosphere human life is enveloped in violence and uncertainty. In The Birthday Party menace is primarily in the form of conformist forces in society destroying individuality, talent and original thinking. The central character Stanley who was an artist is turned into a puppet by Goldberg and Mc Cann. The drama shows his total degeneration.

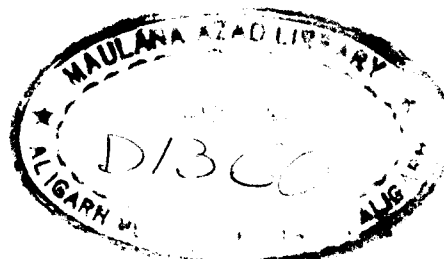
The Caretaker is a record of Davies' search for identity, sense of belonging and protection in society. Aston is also a victim of society, he is crushed by society in the form of medical authorities who render him passive. The drama suggests that he was once a sensitive and imaginative person and tried to maintain his individuality. The Homecoming shows a loss of deeper relations, sense of commitment and moral values in contemporary society. In this play a respectable professor's wife who is a mother is settled as a high class prostitute by her family members. They all take it very casually and even her husband does not object to it. The play is a ruthless critique of the ways of society and shows degeneration, moral depravity and

spiritual importance in society. It is a very gripping, shocking and disturbing play. In A Slight Ache Pinter criticises the conventional life style of upper middle class people, because beneath the facade of their high flown respectability and normalcy lies hollowness of their values and meaninglessness of their pretensions resulting in a deeper level of insecurity. The play also incorporates the theme of identity crisis and problem of communication.

Pinter deals with all these themes in a realistic manner. His plays begin in a casual manner with day to day routine. His characters talk about trivial things in a comic way. He is using realistic form but not to give us reality as we know it because beneath this surface simplicity lie a deeper, sinister layer of meaning. Pinter cuts at the very root of complacency and pretensions of society and presents a reality which is most bewildering and disturbing. He achieves this by his acute, original and disturbing use of language which has a superficial resemblance with everyday conversation but is actually subversive. His characters talk in order to hide their real feelings. They play various games to avoid deeper communication. These games primarily involve language. These are games of evasion, aggression and games to avoid communication. To ask irrelevant questions and demand answers is a very common game in Pinter's early

plays e.g. in The Room, The Birthday Party and to some extent A Slight Ache. Then they play the game of interrogation to prove their dominance over their partners. This game ~~as~~ we have seen is played in The Birthday Party and The Caretaker. Battle game is also very common in Pinter's plays. In this game usually a woman challenges two men into fighting. This game we find in The Homecoming and many later plays by Pinter. These language games help in creating an atmosphere of mystery, ambiguity and menace. Pinter also uses the technique of pauses, silences and repetition to convey the hidden meaning and vile intentions. The comic conversation of his characters reveal their insecurities, their inability to communicate and essential hollowness of their lives. Pinter's use of these games, language devices and clichés give a sharp edge to his plays.

Thus as we have seen above, Pinter's Comedy of Menace is not only a unique manifestation of the absurd approach and an intensification of the dark comedy but also a significant and original contribution to modern drama. It is true he abandoned this approach at a later stage of his career in order to experiment with new techniques and modes of expression. But this group of



six plays characterized as Comedy of Menace was an important phase in his dramatic career which not only foreshadows the later developments in his dramatic approach but also incorporates the themes and concerns which are quite central in Pinter's work.

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